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ALLEGHENY COUNTY EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE¹

Description

In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) is making quality early childhood education more accessible to low-income families. The goal of Allegheny County ECI, a program of United Way, is to create high-quality early education services for up to 4,000 currently unserved children in 80 targeted high-risk neighborhoods in and around Pittsburgh.

Allegheny County ECI is based on a philosophy of neighborhood decision-making. Designated neighborhoods are asked to develop a local plan for early childhood services and to choose a lead agency to be responsible for implementation. To date, ECI has received funding commitments of \$36 million and approved and funded 10 lead agencies covering 36 neighborhoods for activities such as building new child care centers, expanding family child care, creating early literacy programs, and helping providers to become licensed.

Partners

Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative is a program of the United Way of Allegheny County. Partner organizations include:

- Heinz Endowment, RK Mellon, and a number of other foundations;
- Corporate sponsors such as Alcoa, Giant Eagle, Duquesne Light, and PNC Corp.;
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD);
- Allegheny County;
- The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; and
- Neighborhood teams that include service providers, parents, and community leaders.

History and Development

In 1994, the Heinz Endowment approached the United Way of Allegheny County with a million dollars and a challenge to develop a plan for the provision of early

¹ Child Care Partnership Project. (1999). *Profiles of Public-Private Partnerships for Child Care Vol.2*. Washington, DC: Child Care Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

childhood services to low-income children in the county. The United Way responded by bringing together 80 stakeholders from both the private and public sectors to develop a business plan for a comprehensive, neighborhood-based, early childhood initiative. During the planning process, a feasibility study identified many possible partners in both the private and public sectors willing to invest in early childhood.

The business plan for the Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative was approved by the United Way Board in 1996, and ECI management staff were hired. The business plan outlined an initiative that was:

Targeted to low-income families: 80 high-risk neighborhoods were designated for the initiative based on their levels of poverty, female-headed families, high school dropouts, unemployment, and reliance on welfare.

Neighborhood-based: Interested neighborhoods (of the targeted 80) were required to form Neighborhood Coalitions to assess the current status of young children, families, and early education resources, and to develop an ECI proposal.

Comprehensive: Neighborhood plans were required to integrate all services for children aged 0-5 and their families to reduce fragmentation and prevent duplication.

Focused on quality: Comprehensive quality assurance and professional development components were integrated into the initiative to ensure that the early childhood services that were developed would have positive effects on the health and development of children.

Fundraising in both the public and private sectors began in 1996, and the Request for Neighborhood Proposals was released in November of the same year. The Request for Neighborhood Proposals required designated neighborhoods to engage in an extensive, collaborative, planning process to design a comprehensive system of early childhood services appropriate to the area's identified needs. ECI management provided technical assistance to help neighborhoods form coalitions, develop leadership, and design plans. The first neighborhood plan was approved in November 1997, and by the summer of 1999, thirty-six (36) neighborhoods had approved plans.

Current Activities

In each of the ECI neighborhoods, a local advisory committee in collaboration with a local lead agency, provides oversight of the implementation of the neighborhood plan. The local advisory committee includes individuals from the Neighborhood Coalition that prepared the ECI plan, such as parents, providers, community residents, and business leaders.

The service delivery models are unique to each neighborhood. Neighborhood coalitions are required to designate an agency with 501-C-3 status as lead agency and fiduciary agent for the ECI plan. In some neighborhoods, the lead agency may

directly provide the services, while in others they may contract with other service providers.

Neighborhoods are required to demonstrate that the plan will result in a net increase in the number of children served by quality early childhood programs. ECI funds may not be used to replace other funds already employed to provide child care or early education services. However, neighborhoods are allowed flexibility in determining what type of programs will most effectively serve their families' needs. Examples of ECI-supported programs include center-based child care, group home child care, family child care, Head Start or similar programs, school readiness programs, early literacy programs, and other early care and education services.

For example, in some neighborhoods, space within county public housing has been transformed into child care facilities. These are facilities that the county would not have renovated without the start-up funding and technical assistance provided by ECI.

Families living within targeted neighborhoods are eligible for services regardless of income, and fees are on a sliding scale. State and federal funding is also used to subsidize eligible families.

The ECI management team, housed within the United Way, performs a number of functions to support effective ECI implementation at the neighborhood level. ECI management focuses on three main areas:

Quality programs: A comprehensive quality assurance system is in place that uses standards from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Early Childhood Teams, consisting of a Family Child Care Specialist, an Inclusion Specialist, and a Community Liaison, work with the neighborhoods to ensure program implementation in accordance with ECI quality standards. An important component of the quality assurance system is comprehensive career development that requires 50 hours of Preservice training to be an ECI provider. In addition, the quality assurance staff help providers to become licensed and have been working to help all Head Start facilities within ECI achieve licensure by the year 2000.

Community relations: Systematic outreach encourages additional targeted neighborhoods to develop ECI proposals. Comprehensive technical assistance helps neighborhoods with forming neighborhood coalitions; working collaboratively; assessing early education needs; and developing a proposal for a system of early care. Within existing ECI neighborhoods, community activities focus on educating parents about quality care and helping them become advocates for their children.

Policy and information: An important principle of ECI is that there should be a system of early childhood services, rather than the patchwork of services that currently exists. Policy work by ECI management focuses on developing cross-system agreements with state and local government-funded providers of services. For example, ECI management is working collaboratively with state and local

officials, and service providers, to develop a uniform intake form for early education services.

Resources

The expertise of the United Way has led to an extremely successful fundraising effort to support ECI. The five year fundraising goal is to raise between \$50 and \$55 million. Over \$36 million has been committed since efforts began in 1996. Most of this funding is from corporations and foundations, with more than 20 corporate entities and 30 private foundations committing a total of over \$33 million to the project. In addition, over \$1 million has been donated by individuals.

Public-sector support includes a HUD grant of approximately \$1 million to establish ECI in public housing, a grant from Allegheny County for \$50, 000 to fund career development, and over \$700,000 from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Sliding-scale fees paid by parents and state child care subsidies for income-eligible children also provide support for services.

Results

As of September 1999, ECI had increased the licensed/registered early childhood capacity in Allegheny County by 1,042 spaces: 962 combined family child care and child care center spaces, and 306 Head Start spaces.

ECI has enlisted the Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings (SPECS) evaluation team from the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh to conduct a five-year longitudinal study of ECI. SPECS is measuring ECI outcomes by examining benchmarks in four domains: child, family, community, and program quality. Data reported for the quarter ending April 1999 revealed the following:

86% of ECI children demonstrate developmental skills and progress within the average to above-average range for their age based on national norms.

80% of ECI parents show appropriate and effective parenting skills, child development expectations, and nurturing behaviors.

Opportunities for parent involvement were most frequently cited as the most important benefit that the ECI initiative brings to the community in a survey of members of the community advisory boards.

20% of the sites met high-quality standards according to the High Scope PQA tool and a SPECS-designed NAECY instrument, 50% met medium high-quality

standards, and 30% were appraised at low-quality levels and are receiving training and support.

Sustaining and Replicating

ECI continues to raise private and public funds to meet their goal of establishing ECI programs in 80 neighborhoods and expanding early education access for up to 4,000 eligible, low-income children. In September 1999, ECI revised their business plan to put more emphasis on upgrading the quality of existing providers in targeted neighborhoods. ECI management anticipates continued private and expanded public investment, and believes that the following factors will help to sustain the initiative:

- Careful planning, a focus on quality, and attention to documenting results throughout the ECI implementation process;
- A broad funding base, with a number of corporate and foundation sponsors, in addition to state CCDF subsidy and Head Start funding;
- A diverse group of people invested in and benefiting from the effort at the neighborhood level, including service providers, parents, and local leaders; and
- The support of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a group of CEOs who have adopted early care and education as their focus issue and are working with other statewide business groups to promote increased state funding for early care and education programs and services.

Lessons Learned

Quality counts. A quality assurance system and an evaluation were integrated into the ECI project from the initial stages of planning. ECI management believe that this attention to quality is paying off with gains in the health of children and families. This is particularly important in large initiatives such as ECI, where attention to quality can be overlooked in efforts to create capacity in a number of sites.

Focus on infrastructure: Expanding the early care and education resources available to low-income families requires focus on infrastructure. Plan to spend significant time and resources on activities such as finding, renovating, and building facilities that meet the codes for child care services.

Be tenacious. There is no silver bullet for easily creating a quality early childhood initiative, but concentrated attention and resources lead to payoffs over time. When embarking on a community defined and directed initiative, be prepared to spend a great deal of time and effort building capacity and understanding within communities.

Be flexible: As welfare reform or other major government efforts impact early care and education services, initiatives must be able to adjust program hours and focus to meet the needs of families.

Be strategic and persistent when fundraising. A diverse group of public and private entities is willing to invest in early childhood initiatives. Focus on one at a time, and present a clear plan for programming, expected outcomes, and measurement.

Reform the system. Creating a system of care requires more than just increasing the number of quality spaces. Time and energy must be devoted to linking and integrating funding sources and providers. Changing how all of the entities involved conceptualize and conduct their work is time-consuming.

This information was developed as part of the Child Care Partnership Project, a multi-year technical assistance effort funded by the Child Care Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Partnership Project provided a series of technical assistance resources and materials to support the development and strengthening of public-private partnerships to improve the quality and supply of child care. All of the materials produced under the Child Care Partnership Project are through the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center at 800-616-2242.